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SUBJECT: BELGIAN ELECTIONS: FAR RIGHT VLAAMS BELANG
EXPERIENCES FIRST CRISIS

¶1. (SBU) Fresh off a relatively disappointing showing in the October 8 local Belgian elections, where the far right Vlaams Belang (VB) failed to achieve a much sought after breakthrough in the larger cities of Flanders, the party finds itself struggling with an unprecedented internal crisis, one which has prompted public suggestions that the Flemish nationalist group has peaked. The signs of trouble include an open challenge to the party's top leadership, and demands for a "new direction."

¶2. (SBU) The Vlaams Belang is a party tightly controlled by a trio of experienced pols, Filip Dewinter, the party's congenial public face in Antwerp and the Flemish regional parliament, federal parliamentarian Gerolf Annemans, the front man at the federal level, and party president Frank Vanhecke, the party's chief strategist. Prior to October's municipal elections these party leaders attempted to broaden the party's base by forging an alliance with "outsiders" like Senator Hugo Coveliers, a Flemish Liberal (VLD) dissenter cast out of that party for disagreeing too often and too publicly with its top people, a list that included the Prime Minister. The move failed, most notably in Antwerp, where the Vlaams Belang failed to capture the mayor's seat, or to achieve a breakthrough on the city council. VB also lost council seats in Ghent, and failed to gain control of a single local governing council.

¶3. (SBU) This failure sparked numerous public comments that the far right party had peaked. Shocked by the Antwerp defeat, some VB insiders turned on the party leadership, whom they blamed for recruiting lackluster candidates and internal disorganization. The defeat also brought into the open a debate the leadership had managed to avoid while the party seemed to be advancing toward an ever higher position within the club of Flemish political parties.

¶4. (SBU) One of the most important public critics has been Flemish parliamentarian Marie-Rose Morel. Morel had scored rather well in the election and sought to position herself as a potential party leader. She urged the leadership to adopt a softer party line that would attract conservative voters otherwise scared off by the party's image. Another opportunity for VB to broaden its base and admit an outsider to its ranks came when, immediately after the municipal polls, the VLD ejected maverick senator Jean-Marie Dedecker. Like Coveliers, Dedecker also had a history of irritating his party's leaders. Dedecker, however, fully aware of his popularity, asked too high a price from VB: i.e., a front and center

role in the upcoming general election.

¶5. (SBU) For the first time in the party's history its leadership has publicly acknowledged the existence of internal problems. At the same time, the trio of leaders has chosen not to follow the "soft" line advocated by Morel, but to "get back to basics." Party president Vanhecke has announced that he, and no one else, will head the party's Senate ticket for the next general election, a move that has disappointed the popular Morel. Steered by Dewinter, VB also has fallen back on what it believes is its best chance for success in the federal election - a direct appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: VB's problems reflect the natural tension that develops when a quasi-social movement attempts to make the transition to mass political party. Many of its current adherents want the party to play an active role in government, and not just sit on the sidelines. The party's inability to score a breakthrough during the municipal polls will exacerbate this point of friction. That said, the VB still has a good chance to gain some ground in the upcoming general elections. On the assumption that the party's main issues have more resonance at the federal level, some observers believe VB could garner at last 25 percent of the vote, slightly more than the 24 percent of the Flemish vote won in the 2004 regional elections. A strong showing would indicate significant support for its platform within Belgium, and could set VB up as the premiere opposition party. However, another disappointing result is certain to cause an even more intense internal crisis, weakening the far right's ability to influence any number of debates in the coming months.

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